

The Impact of Incentives on Early Childhood Teachers' Proficiency in Lubombo Region, Eswatini

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Abstract

Early childhood development programmes have been found to be crucial in the development of children in physical, cognitive, socio-emotional and linguistic domains. For early childhood development (ECD) programmes to be effective, several factors need to be considered, among them human and material resources. Although the availability of the aforementioned factors is of the utmost importance, there is also a need to establish the unforeseen factors that can help ECD programmes to be more effective. Currently, there is little information regarding what can facilitate proficiency among early childhood teachers in their daily practice. This study focused on the impact of incentives on the performance of early childhood development teachers in the Lubombo region in Eswatini, formerly Swaziland. The objectives of the study were to find out the types of incentives given to ECD teachers, to examine the factors affecting the ECD teachers' incentives and proficiency, and to explore the best ways of incentivising ECD teachers to improve their effectiveness. The research questions guiding the study were derived from the research objectives and the approach used in the study was purely qualitative. The study adopted a case study design and used unstructured questionnaires, cell phone interviews and focus group discussions as data collection tools. The research was confined to Lubombo, where a sample of 30 participants was selected. The sample included 10 ECD teachers, 10 parents and 10 administrators. The findings of the study were that ECD teachers are paid low salaries, which are not sustainable, and

they are not hired by the government and so have no pensionable benefits. The study recommends that the use of incentives can improve the proficiency of early childhood teachers; ECD teachers should be paid salaries like any other teacher that are scaled according to their qualifications. Scholarships to further their studies should also be made available to them. More research is essential in areas of teachers' proficiency and quality early childhood development programmes.

Keywords: incentives; professional; efficiency; early childhood development

Introduction

The introduction of early childhood development (ECD) programmes on the African continent, particularly in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, has been viewed as a noble endeavour towards the pursuit of the holistic development of young children. Parents, both working and non-working, have realised the role this programme plays in allowing them an opportunity to concentrate on their work without being bothered by their children. Early childhood development centres have taken over the responsibility of childcare from parents, leaving them with ample time to engage in other personal activities. The responsibility of caring for and educating young children is admittedly not an easy one (WHO and UNICEF 2018). While in college or university, ECD students study common modules with their counterparts pursuing Bachelor of Education degrees (BEDs), which makes them comparable with these students; the only difference is that they have some modules that are specific to managing young learners. In Eswatini, although communities seem to acknowledge notable developments in children who go through ECD programmes, the treatment of ECD teachers leaves a lot to be desired. Most ECD teachers who are fortunate enough to be employed are not covered by the government schemes enjoyed by other categories of educators. For instance, Eswatini early childhood development teachers do not receive benefits such as pension, accommodation subsidies, and bursaries for further studies. Some communities in Lubombo region that are cognisant of the plight of ECD teachers and the services they render amid the inequalities brought about by the government of Eswatini have taken it upon themselves to incentivise them. The introduction of incentives has prompted this research in order to establish their effects on teacher proficiency. It is a known fact that expectations for competency and accountability are very high at ECD level, while resources for professional development are limited. It is against this background that the early childhood development field needs well-conducted empirical studies on which to base the impact of incentives on the proficiency of teachers. Thus, this article focuses on the impact of incentives in terms of how they can influence proficiency in the practitioner's behaviour and dispositions (Sheridan et al. 2009).

Methods

This study is qualitative in nature. It made use of multiple methods in order to adopt an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Aspers and Corte 2019). This

approach is relevant in the current study to establish the impact of incentives on ECD teachers' proficiency in the Lubombo region.

Population and Sampling

A population generally encompasses the total number of subjects from which the researcher wishes to draw conclusions. Momoh (2021) defines a population as an entire group of people, objects, events, hospital visits or measurements. Muchengetwa (2005, 37) defines a population as "the totality of items or things under consideration." Therefore, a population refers to the whole set of entities that decisions relate to and the entire group of objects of a particular type under study. This study was confined to the Lubombo district in Eswatini, with parents, school administrators and foundation phase teachers comprising the population. Ten teachers, 10 parents and 10 school administrators from Lubombo region were purposively sampled as they were believed to be able to provide the required information on the impact of incentives on ECD teachers' proficiency (Monette, Sullivan, and DeJong 2011). The total sample size was 30 participants and all of these participated in the study. Questionnaires were distributed to ECD teachers and administrators, and parents were interviewed telephonically. Four ECD teachers, four administrators and four parents were randomly selected from the total sample of participants to participate in a focus group discussion so as to further explore the issue under study. The data gathered from the participants was expanded in thick rich descriptions to come up with themes.

Instrumentation

According to Noble and Heale (2019), triangulation is a process of using multiple data collection tools to check the validity of the findings. This is a way of confirming the validity of research through using many instruments to collect data on the same topic. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce an understanding while increasing the credibility and validity of the research findings. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) assert that triangulation is not only about validation, but also about deepening and widening understanding of a phenomenon. It is the use of two or more instruments of data collection in the study of some aspects of human behaviour. Therefore, triangulation entails the use of a variety of data gathering instruments, sources and settings in the data collection process. Based on the above remarks, using questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions, the triangulation of findings in this study was guaranteed. A single method can never adequately shed light on a phenomenon. Triangulation allows one to combine individual and group research choices to help lower bias, for example because of peer pressure, in focus group participants.

Results

The results were based on the research findings concerning the impact of incentives on the proficiency of early childhood development teachers. A thematic analysis of the

qualitative data gathered from the respondents was done and the findings are discussed according to the objectives of the study.

Presentation of Results

Biodata Results

This section provides information regarding the teachers' age ranges, educational level and years of experience. The information was obtained from the biodata section of the questionnaire guides. The biodata provides a base to understand the nature of the respondents who were engaged in the study.

Age Category

Table 1: Age category

Age	Total	Percentage (%)
1. Less than 20 years	1	10
2. 20–29 years	1	10
3. 30–39 years	3	30
4. 40–49 years	4	40
5. 50–59 years	1	10
Total	10	100

The table above summarises the age categories of teachers who took part in this research study. According to Table 1, 40% of the teachers were in their 40s, and this suggests that the profession is attracting more middle-aged professionals than the younger generation as the sample indicates that only a tenth of the teacher participants were in their 20s. The issue of incentives could be one of the likely causes for this age discrepancy.

Educational Level

Table 2: Educational level

Education	Total	Percentage
High school	2	20
Certificate/ diploma	7	70
Undergraduate degree	1	10
Master's degree	None	None
Total	10	100

Data from Table 2 presents the level of education of the teachers who took part in the study. The table shows that 10% of the participants have undergraduate degrees; 70% of the ECD teachers have certificates and diplomas in early childhood development, and 20% are paraprofessionals. This indicates that the level of education of ECD teachers is

still low in the country and those who are qualified are struggling to get well-remunerating jobs.

Themes

Theme 1: Types of Incentives Available to Teachers

A concern frequently raised by respondents concerns salaries of ECD teachers. For example, when asked the sub-research question, “What are the types of teacher’s incentives?,” about 75% of ECD teachers shared the same response: they get incentives from school fees paid by the parents and not from the government as is the case with teachers in the primary school foundation phase. The ECD teachers had the following to say:

Primarily the government does not recognise us and our role in the education system, hence it does not give us any incentives and only those teaching in the primary school foundation phase get monetary incentives and other incentives like bonus and back pay.

As for us, the only incentives we get come directly from the school levies, making it difficult if parents fail to pay these fees and the payment of our incentives is based on the discretion of our principals or administrators.

Our situation in terms of incentives is made worse by administrators or principals, who refuse to pay us even when parents would have fully paid their fees.

Without the school fees they receive nothing, and they go for months without a salary, which demotivates them in their work. Furthermore, about 70% of the administrators concur that teachers were not satisfied with the salary they receive because it is not sustainable, particularly as parents sometimes fail to pay fees on time. They stated that the payment system affects ECD teachers, and this discourages the teachers’ effort in helping the children at this stage. Parents said:

It is true that ECD teachers are getting very little in terms of salary, which seriously demotivates them in conducting their work and at times depending on the availability or unavailability of funds, they can go for some months without getting any salary.

The inconsistency of their incentives and salary make ECD teachers find it difficult to commit themselves fully to their job.

Proficiency is highly affected by motivation. You cannot expect if from someone who is not motivated financially.

I want to admit that we have witnessed cases of self-motivated teachers who have continued to work very well, regardless of non-payment of incentives and salaries.

About 70% of the parents who participated also shared the same sentiments and recommended that teachers should be given bonuses and scholarships to help them to

further their studies. The participants further suggested trips to show appreciation in order to supplement the meagre salary they get, since the incentives received are not enough to sustain their needs. The other factor is that, when parents fail to pay their children's fees, it means that the concerned teachers will not get their salary for that month. About 80% of the participants argued that ECD teachers should be hired permanently and should be pensionable for job security, because as of now they are not, and their work is not recognised. However, some of the pre-primary levels receive grants from non-government organisations (NGOs) such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World Vision, Save the Children and many more, but not all schools receive such grants, thus leaving some poorly resourced. The administrators said the following:

The ECD programme has improved the education standards in eSwatini, and particularly in Lubombo region. The government should take this programme seriously. It should employ more ECD teachers to reduce their workload, while at the same time taking the responsibility of paying them.

ECD teachers handle young and delicate children. They deserve better remuneration and incentives.

I do not see the difference between ECD teachers and those in the foundational primary school classes. To me they are all teachers and should be treated the same.

It is unfair to deny ECD teachers opportunities for further studies and other benefits. This will demotivate them.

I strongly believe they deserve a bonus and study opportunities like any other teacher.

I want to make it clear that these ECD teachers work harder than any other teacher. They help these young children develop various skills, which is not easy. They deserve a pension and government salary.

The eSwatini government is being unfair to ECD teachers, who invest in education, only to be paid less.

Had it not been for the intervention of non-governmental organisations like UNICEF, World Vision and Save the children, who are assisting ECD teachers in various ways, we could not be having these teachers by now. No one can work for nothing.

Theme 2: Factors Affecting Teacher's Incentives and Proficiency

There are many factors affecting early childhood development teachers' proficiency. The data collected indicates that 65% of the participants identified a lack of money as one of the factors that affect teachers' proficiency in Eswatini. It was established that failure by parents to either pay on time or at all affects ECD teachers' remuneration. This has a negative impact on their welfare, resulting in compromised performance. Regarding this issue, parents expressed the following:

Our failure to pay levies affects ECD teachers' incentives. There is no way they can be given incentives, unless we fully pay levies.

Poor remuneration affects ECD teachers' proficiency. Honestly we will be demanding too much from someone who is poorly remunerated.

We need to appreciate that ECD teachers are parents as well, and should pay fees for their children and feed them. Failure to get paid results in stress and poor performance.

You cannot be proficient at work when you are hungry due to non-payment of salaries, let alone incentives.

About 60% of the parents confirmed that their failure to pay levies contributed to low salaries being paid to ECD teachers. However, the same parents attributed their inability to pay levies to an unstable economy and unemployment. These views were echoed by 40% of the administrators, who cited a lack of money as a factor that affects ECD teachers' remuneration and incentivisation. The other 60% of administrators agreed that the government supports a very insignificant number of ECD teachers because of financial constraints. The research revealed that 80% of ECD teachers were in agreement with the administrators that inadequate financial resources compromised possible opportunities for scholarships, further training and promotions. The study established that there was uniformity in the responses from teachers and administrators. For example, both parties expressed the following similar sentiments:

The major problem we have is that the government of eSwatini does not recognise ECD teachers' qualification, hence the reason it is not recruiting them.

Personally, I doubt that the government does not recognise the hard work of ECD teachers, but I think it lacks funds to pay them like it is doing with other teachers.

It is not true that ECD qualifications are not recognised in our country, but the colleges do not have the capacity to introduce this programme since it is very expensive.

We are not getting funding to study further due to the failing economy. We hope when our economy begins to stabilise, such opportunities will be extended to us as well.

Theme 3: Best Ways of Incentivising ECD Teachers to Improve Their Proficiency

The participants are indisputably in agreement that incentives have a motivational effect on teachers' commitment to and interaction with young children. The research found that 85% of ECD teachers agreed that the provision of incentives could improve their efficiency. Early childhood teachers who participated in this study cited incentives such as staff development training and workshops as necessary in promoting teacher efficiency. About 90% of parents concurred that teachers should be supported

financially, materially and through in-service training. In the process of data collection, teachers said:

Incentives in different forms can boost our morale to do our work. These can be sponsored recreational trips, workshops, in-service training and many other non-monetary benefits.

Teacher requirements come in various ways. Therefore, such incentives like food hampers, non-payment of levies for their children and end of term presents can motivate us to be proficient at work.

Sustainable salaries and incentives contribute to proficiency and commitment towards work.

Solicited information from different sources reveal that qualified ECD teachers could be retained in this profession if they are supported financially and given permanent posts by the Teaching Service Commission (TSC). Furthermore, 95% of administrators concurred with other categories of participants that the use of incentives could improve teachers' efficiency at this level. Stakeholders need to support ECD teachers by improving their salaries, enacting teacher supportive policies, providing in-service training, and providing good and habitable infrastructure (classrooms) in the learning centres. Administrators had the following to say:

In order to retain good teachers, there is a need to pay them better salaries and incentives and a good salary and incentives are the best strategies of improving teacher proficiency.

We are losing good teachers to those schools which are paying them handsomely and the Teaching Service Commission should employ ECD teachers and give them the same benefits enjoyed by other teachers.

ECD teachers are laying a good foundation for teachers in later grades, hence they deserve similar treatment like any other teacher, hence the Eswatini government should revise its policies towards the recruitment of teachers to include ECD teachers.

We are aware that some teachers have left our region to practise in those regions where they are paid incentives and better salaries. In Lubombo region, most ECD infrastructure is very uninhabitable, subjecting children and teachers to possible danger. This alone makes teachers feel unvalued and demotivated to work.

ECD teachers need a community that recognises and appreciates their work.

Encouraging parents to send their children to pre-primary school and paying fees was another suggestion unanimously given by different categories of participants. The participants agreed that teachers should be provided with in-service training relevant to the development of young children. Parents and administrators said:

ECD should be mandatory, with parents urged to pay levies. The remarkable development of our children due to undergoing ECD programmes should be reciprocated by paying teachers incentives.

Although, I admit that ECD teachers need incentives and a better salary to perform, I still believe in-service training and valuing them can still motivate them to produce results.

Findings of the Study

Finding 1

ECD teachers are paid very low salaries on the salary scale.

Finding 2

ECD teachers receive salaries that are not sustainable and this demoralises them.

Finding 3

ECD teachers are not hired by the government and receive no pensionable allowances.

Discussion of Findings According to Objectives

ECD Teachers' Salaries

The study results reveal that teachers are given a salary by parents and these incentives are poor and not satisfactory or encouraging at all. Some teachers do not even receive these incentives at all. The centre directors pay teachers from the school funds and the salary is not standard across all centres. The teachers' salaries depend on their directors' discretion and the availability of funds. The salaries are not based on teacher qualifications as is the case with primary school teachers of the foundation phase who receive their salaries from the government (Teacher Service Commission). The directors or owners of the centres underpay the ECD teachers in the majority of cases. This has resulted in qualified teachers leaving the profession for greener pastures, mostly outside the country. This is in line with evidence from literature on the incentive theory which puts forward the idea that behaviour is primarily extrinsically driven. The theory further states that people are more motivated to perform activities if they receive a reward afterward than simply because they enjoy the activities themselves (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 1999).

It was further observed that the ECD teaching profession is not attracting young qualified teachers, due to a number of reasons, chief among them being poor remuneration. For example, in this profession, usually one would find unqualified teachers or paraprofessionals trained by NGOs, like UNICEF, and fewer qualified teachers who truly love working with children staying in the profession. Although many claims are made in the reviewed literature that low salaries and employment opportunities elsewhere are among the reasons why ECD teachers leave, favourable

working conditions also contribute to this (Cherry 2020). As revealed by some teachers who participated in the study, at times only intrinsic desire compels them to remain at work; yet in most situations behaviours are driven by a desire for external rewards. Killeen (1982) claimed that incentives are a motivational factor for enhanced teacher performance in caring for young children. Killeen (1982) further spoke of the theory of human motivation, stating that our actions are often inspired by a desire to gain outside reinforcement. So, these views concur with the study findings that sometimes the teachers are driven by intrinsic and extrinsic factors. For example, some of the teachers who have been in this profession for a long time are motivated to act on internal desires and wishes, while the recently employed are driven by external rewards.

Most of the evidence points to the lack of a good salary as key in letting down the profession, as most of the teachers who remain in the profession are those who are trained as paraprofessionals, and those with better qualifications leave for greener pastures. Again, although incentives that ECD teachers receive have been hailed as playing a motivational role in encouraging proficiency, they are arguably not satisfactory at all. In some situations, ECD teachers do not receive monetary incentives, but rather toys for their children and those in their centres. This is seen as an attempt to encourage them to work, despite not constituting a direct incentive to the teacher. Unfortunately, not all centres are fortunate enough to receive donated materials. Most of the centres are public/community centres that just survive on their own. These are probably the most affected, since teachers in these centres rely on the payment of fees and their only incentive is that they receive knowledge through in-service workshops organised by Early Childhood Development Regional Inspectors and other non-governmental organisations such as UNICEF. Parents do provide teachers with small gifts at the end of the year when these teachers in turn present to their children gifts on closing days. Sometimes teachers receive grants for their centres from NGOs, but these are still insignificant, and unfortunately not all centres get them, since NGOs only select a few. Notable NGOs that assist these centres, as indicated above, include UNICEF and World Vision, among others.

Admittedly, although the gifts are small, they play a great motivational role for the ECD teachers. However, some private ECD centre owners provide bonuses as incentives to their teachers. The findings of this study thus concur with Lelissa's (2018) finding that workers with feelings of resentment and exhaustion may have low productivity or a poor level of motivation that affects their performance at their jobs. In contrast, there is enough evidence that ECD workers who were highly motivated to work were more likely to be productive than those who were forced to do their job. As this suggests, the teacher's performance is connected to their motivation, capacity and work conditions. According to the findings of the study, sometimes there are no incentives at all, and this discourages the teachers from doing their work. This is especially the case in the community centres, as evidenced by at least 20% of the ECD teacher participants who cited this in their answers. This finding is in line with Imberman (2015) who found that there is a wide distinction across the school districts in the United States, as some

districts have no incentive programmes, while in others nearly half the districts offered incentives. This indicates that in almost all communities' incentives are given, although these are not always adequate, consistent and satisfying.

Furthermore, besides incentives, ECD teachers should be given permanent and pensionable posts for their job security. That is, the government must employ them on a full-time basis as this could motivate them significantly. What is happening in the country currently is that, despite holding relevant qualifications, the government is not hiring these teachers into permanent posts. Only an insignificant percentage have been given permanent posts, and they are not given incentives such as those given to primary teachers who possess the same qualification. It is still not clear from the Teacher Commission Services why teachers who would have attended to same colleges and universities and received similar qualifications are treated differently. The participants indicated that most of the reasons given by people for this treatment of ECD teachers are mostly speculative and baseless.

Lack of Finances and Economic Instability Affect the Teachers' Incentives and Proficiency

When asked what affects ECD teachers' incentives and proficiency, participants pointed out that some of the challenges were a lack of money and an unstable economy. Shortages of working tools in the centres, the lack of a stable payment system for ECD teachers, poor infrastructure and the lack of a clear policy on incentives were also some of the challenges identified as affecting ECD teachers' welfare according to the participants. Other notable factors were the payment system, which is not sustainable, with teachers going without pay for some months when parents fail to pay fees. Inadequate training and lack of promotions for ECD teachers were also identified as hindrances to teachers' proficiency.

The participants revealed that the factors affecting teachers' incentives centre on the lack of money and an unstable economy. Money was found to be the best reinforcement or incentive for workers. Without money, it is difficult for teachers to be productive, since they will be unable to meet their basic needs. ECD teachers sometimes go without pay for months. For example, 70% of the answers shared by the ECD respondents voiced similar sentiments: that parents do not pay fees for their children on time and some end up not paying at all. The theory of motivation suggests that behaviour is motivated by reinforcement or incentives, and if reinforcement is poor, behaviour will be affected (Shrestha 2017). The workers become demotivated. It was found that the ECD teachers are not satisfied with their salary and the treatment they receive due to the lack of recognition of their work. A shortage of working tools and teaching materials in the centres were other factors that demoralise teachers' efforts to help the learners. A lack of or inadequate funds were seen as a major factor, because without money it is not possible to purchase the required materials. For example, Lavy (2007) found that both incentives related to salaries and incentives related to resources given to schools had positive effects on teachers' performances. Nevertheless, monetary incentives in the

form of teacher salaries were found to be more cost effective than awarding more resources to the school teacher.

Another finding was that pre-primary centres do not have the proper infrastructure and other ideal facilities to function as schools. This is due to the unstable economy of the country. All these conditions lead to poor efficiency of the ECD professionals. Moreover, some of the answers given by the participants indicated that ECD teachers' welfare is not prioritised as they are the lowest paid teachers by government and private owners. This selective treatment does not motivate them at all as compared to their counterparts, as they are viewed as inferior and underqualified. Cherry's (2020) research findings submit that teacher quality is viewed as one of the most important inputs in an education production function. There is broad agreement that the academic achievement of students can be raised if the quality of teachers improves. In other words, this insight poses a task to politics to improve incentives for teachers to perform better. Also, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2021) concurs that improving the motivation and incentives of teachers greatly improves the overall quality of the education system. Furthermore, UNESCO's (2021) research suggests that children learn better in classrooms manned by highly dedicated and motivated teachers. Thus, raising the motivation and status of teachers as well as retaining high-quality teachers is therefore vital in the improvement of the education system.

Other findings of the study include the lack of a sustainable payment system for ECD teachers and the lack of clear policy on incentives. Some owners of pre-primary centres fail to pay their teachers not because there is no money, but because of selfish reasons that cause some teachers not to get their payment on time. The lack of policy was also another factor of concern raised by the participants, which makes it difficult for ECD teachers to be paid. Parents are not bound by any legal framework to pay fees for their children and so the payment of fees depends on how the parents value their children's education. There is also no standard policy stipulating how much an ECD teacher should be paid. As a result, preschool centre owners give their teachers what they feel like giving them. The payment system is not sustainable, as sometimes the teachers can go without pay for some months when parents fail to pay fees. UNESCO's (2021) research reveals that it is true that teachers are intrinsically motivated to teach all their learners. However, a variety of intrinsic factors (such as loving the teaching process and enjoying children) and extrinsic factors (such as a salary and further education opportunities) influence teachers' motivation levels. So, low teacher motivation can affect the quality of candidates entering the profession. These findings of the study were consistent with the literature review.

Moreover, the lack of government commitment to employ ECD teachers was another factor that was found to affect the teachers' motivation. Usually when people undergo training, they have high hopes of being employed. Thus the lack of employment affects their interest in the job. Low teacher motivation can affect the quality of students

entering the profession (UNESCO 2021). The focus should be on how policymakers and education leaders can improve teacher efforts towards outcomes of interest, specifically improving student achievement. In many education systems students suffer due to struggles in attracting high quality teachers, limited motivation for teachers to perform their jobs well and teacher attrition. These factors come back to education planners who should consider the impact of their decisions on teachers and their motivation to teach.

The Best Ways to Incentivise ECD Teachers

The participants suggested many possible ways to incentivise them, but giving scholarships to further their education and supporting them with a good, sustainable salary topped the list. Other benefits, such as accommodation, medical aid, age-appropriate learning materials for their centres and in-service training, were also singled out during the study. Early childhood development is a very important phase in education, which needs to be well supported by all stakeholders. This is vital, because ECD is the foundation for future learning. Teachers need support from parents, NGOs, and the inspectorate, among many other stakeholders. Parents must pay fees for their children so that schools do not suffer a shortage of funds. An inter-ministerial approach should be used, where important stakeholders put their heads together and pull resources for the betterment of ECD teachers. The schools' inspectors can conduct in-service workshops for these teachers to bridge any gaps in their education at college or on the changes brought about by contemporary issues that directly affect the education sector. In support of this notion, Imberman's (2015) survey of schools and staffing of the United States Department of Education reveals that financial incentives for teachers can be effective if appropriately designed, while poorly designed incentives yield little benefit. Thus policymakers should avoid threshold-based incentives, for example based on meeting a target or performing better than other teachers, and should instead favour systems based on incremental improvements in student performance. To avoid having teachers focus on any specific measure at the expense of broad learning, incentives should be aligned with multiple outcomes that are both objective and subjective (Imberman 2015). Improving the motivation and incentives of teachers greatly improves the overall quality of the education system (UNESCO 2021). Providing good structures, infrastructure, sanitation and feeding programmes for preschools was seen as key among other strategies raised by the participants. Parents should also be encouraged with the offer of free primary education to bring their children to preschool rather than waiting and taking them directly to primary school and skipping this essential phase. Advocates of teacher incentives have also shown that they can drive improvements in student outcomes through multiple channels, such as providing financial incentives for teachers to focus their effort, encouraging the development of stronger teaching skills through increasing incentives for high performing teachers to enter and remain in schools subject to the incentives, and by altering the selection of individuals who enter the teaching profession to favour those who have the ability to benefit from such a reward system (Dee and Wyckoff 2013). These different ways of incentivising teachers and many more could improve the proficiency of pre-primary teachers.

Another finding was that ECD teachers should be supported financially by giving them a good sustainable salary. The government has to intervene in the ECD profession by committing itself to taking over the financial responsibilities as it did for primary teachers in the foundation phase who are paid by the Teaching Service Commission. This could improve the ECD teachers' status. This is in line with UNESCO's (2021) report which says that the initial desire of teachers to join the teaching profession influences their future job satisfaction and desire to remain in the teaching profession. Therefore, increasing the status of the teaching profession and the perceived value of teachers by investing in improving the condition and realities of the profession would be helpful. These teachers should also be provided with running water, electricity and accommodation, transport, and medical aid allowances. For example, teachers who are posted to schools far away from their families may desire to transfer or leave teaching completely. Some teacher posts involve more hardships than others, for example in remote locations, in conflict zones or in communities with high levels of poverty. As a result, teachers may need additional incentives to remain in posts where personal conditions are less enticing. Attractive housing, running water and consistent electricity were some of the most cost-effective approaches to motivate teachers in rural areas, in line with UNESCO's (2021) recommendations. Likewise, the incentive theory, which is built on the idea that behaviour is primarily driven by extrinsic factors, suggests that people are more motivated to perform activities if they receive a reward afterward than simply because they enjoy the activities themselves (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 1999).

Lastly, the study found that a preschool curriculum should be put in place that can guide teachers on what they should teach. This is required to avoid a situation where ECD teachers operate in a vacuum. Participants said that a national or centralised curriculum was ideal to ensure quality learning experiences across the country. To improve the proficiency of ECD teachers, a curriculum for preschool children should be developed. This could improve the ECD teachers' efficiency, because they would know what to do, as is the case with the primary foundation phase, which has a proper syllabus. Concerning the curriculum, participants even suggested that a regionally developed curriculum that is sensitive to the needs of the district would be ideal. They added that the regional offices could mobilise specialists to come up with a comprehensive ECD syllabus and learning literature that are culturally cognisant. As for the activities and other learning materials, the participants suggested that, since the purpose of ECD programmes is to develop children in different domains, there is a need to embark on toy production. They argued that toy production is ideal as it could promote the utilisation of locally available resources that are sustainable.

Besides the absence of a curriculum, the participants also complained about the lack of policy on incentives, which they said should be put in place and be mandatory. They argued that a policy on incentives and ECD is a prerequisite that should be put in place in order to help pre-primary education not to collapse. This is in line with UNESCO's (2014) research study which found that investments made by the World Bank in training ECD teachers were at risk of being wasted, because trained ECD teachers leave their

jobs as a result of poor and irregular pay. Participants bemoaned the absence of a policy that makes ECD programmes compulsory for every child. They said the relaxation of rules has caused parents not to send their children to these programmes, and instead to wait for them to be ready for foundational primary school classes, which are free. This tendency has resulted in learners who fall far behind others in later classes because of having been excluded from this crucial stage of the education system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to bring out a clear understanding of the impact of incentives on the proficiency of ECD teachers in the Lubombo region in Eswatini. The findings of the study reveal that the use of incentives has an impact on the proficiency of ECD teachers. This was confirmed by research findings discussed in the literature review, which show that incentives do have an impact on the proficiency of pre-primary teachers as these teachers are given a very low salary that is not sustainable and at times inconsistent. ECD teachers do not have permanent and pensionable posts like other teachers, as they are not hired by the government. There was no legal guiding framework on incentives for ECD teachers in the Lubombo region. Many stakeholders do not take early childhood development seriously and the government is doing little for this pre-primary level of education. ECD teachers want to upgrade their standard of life, but they are struggling to do so due to their poor remuneration. Thus, 80% of the participants were of the view that teachers should be given incentives and rewards for the good work they are doing in laying the foundation for young learners.

The study recommends the following:

- ECD teachers should be well-looked-after like the other academic professionals in the country; they should be provided with a higher salary according to their qualifications and the untrained teachers should be provided with scholarships to further their education.
- Policymakers have to put in place a policy on incentives for ECD teachers and these incentives should be awarded to deserving and hard-working teachers so as to acknowledge their efforts and motivate them.
- A proper preschool curriculum should be put in place so that every school, whether public or private, can follow it as a national standard, and this curriculum should be aligned with primary schools for easy assessment.
- Advocacy on early childhood education is key so that all stakeholders can support the programmes.
- ECD teachers need to be trained and receive continuous staff development so as to provide quality ECD service delivery.

- Proper learning infrastructure and facilities need to be constructed to improve proficiency in ECD programmes.

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